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Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Tuesday, 9 July 1996, at 10 a.m.

President: Mr. MOUBARAK (Lebanon)
(Vice-President)

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In the absence of the President, Mr. Moubarak (Lebanon), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (continued)

Informal dialogue with country teams

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme), speaking as United Nations Resident Coordinator in Egypt, said that the United Nations system as a whole had moved towards a more cohesive role for the Resident Coordinator system, adopting Sustainable Human Development as its paradigm, and collaborative programming as its modus operandi. To that end, the country team, which represented a large number of agencies and staff, had worked with other multilateral and bilateral donors to form a donor assistance group to enhance development cooperation and dialogue.

With regard to harmonization in programming matters, the country team had worked with the entire development community on thematic programmes aimed at helping the Egyptian Government mitigate the impact of structural adjustment and reform. In addition to area-based programmes, the country team had also cooperated on issues-based programmes such as the Government's drive for basic education reform and the elaboration of information systems for development. The nine United Nations agencies in Egypt had also established a permanent team for disaster management and had applied the lead agency principle to coordination of programmes in the follow-up to the major international conferences.

With regard to coordination mechanisms and harmonization of procedures, the team had established systems for the sharing of development experiences with representatives from all sectors of the donor community, World Bank and international organizations. Development of Egypt's first country strategy note (CSN) would be preceded by an area-based initiative in the Sinai which would serve as a pilot case.

With regard to the common country assessment, the Egypt human development report, which was produced by the Institute of National Planning with UNDP support, was to be further upgraded in order to produce the data/indicators required for the implementation of that assessment. The Government was also reviewing its resourcing priorities in the light of the 20/20 Concept, which was being used as a measuring stick to gauge the support of the donor community for social development and basic needs.

Within the United Nations system, a three-level framework had been developed to ensure streamlining of roles and activities at the macro, meso and micro levels. At the same time, an inter-agency programme/project appraisal committee was being established to strengthen cooperation and avoid duplication of effort. At the national level, the Operational Unit for Development Assistance continued to offer invaluable support for programme implementation, while non-governmental organizations were being strengthened in order to enhance the targeting of their work at the grass-roots level.

In terms of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment, the human development report for Egypt had proved a useful operational tool, which had been taken up by the 26 Governors of Egypt as an instrument to monitor the effectiveness of their actions and of the work of the United Nations system. The report had also fostered healthy competition between Governors, helping to encourage efforts towards performance improvements and to direct the interventions required of Government and the United Nations agencies.

A number of initiatives had been proposed to help create and project a unified profile for the United Nations in Egypt, through the creation of a home page on the Internet, the establishment of a unified United Nations reference library and the development of a unified media strategy.

In order to enhance harmonization in operational and administrative matters, the country team was investigating opportunities for shared and common services, including electronic and travel services, as well as security systems. The search for common premises continued, although its resolution also depended on changes being made in the host country agreement, preferably through the establishment of a common agreement to cover all agencies.

Putting all those efforts into some perspective, the case of Sinai might serve as a testing ground to show that the United Nations could cooperate effectively to promote sustainable development in a politically relevant area.

Having suffered from underdevelopment for years, Sinai had been chosen by the Government for a development and revitalization programme under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture. The United Nations, which had been charged with a range of tasks involving the development of infrastructure, vocational training and employment, viewed the Sinai challenge as an opportunity to collaborate on focused development.

Mr. KAMANDO (United Republic of Tanzania) said that, although paragraph 24 of the report of the Secretary-General (E/1996/64) had referred to the diversity of rules and procedures as an obstacle to coordination in the field, the resident coordinator had not mentioned that as a difficulty. He would like to hear more about how the diversity of rules and procedures affected national institutions managing externally funded programmes.

Mr. YUAN Shaofu (China) asked what role the Government played in coordinating the many United Nations agencies represented in Egypt, and what channels were used by United Nations agencies for programme delivery.

Mrs. REBONG (Philippines) said that, although things appeared to be working well in Egypt, she wondered if any problems had been encountered that might have resulted from decisions taken at Headquarters.

Ms. BERGERON (Canada) asked what major obstacles and difficulties had been encountered in coordinating multilateral and bilateral aid, and whether those agencies met on a regular basis in order to strengthen their cooperation. She would also like to learn more about the workings of cooperation between the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations in Egypt.

Ms. REMMELZWAAL (Netherlands) said that specific examples of cooperation between the Bretton Woods institutions and the United Nations in the field would be welcome, along with suggestions for improvement. She would like to hear more about the country programme procedure, since UNICEF placed a great deal of emphasis on programme preparation in the country itself.

Mr. RAZA (Pakistan), noting that in paragraph 40 of its resolution 50/120 the General Assembly had decided that resident coordinators should be informed of planned programme activities, inquired whether they were actually being so informed by the other agencies of the system. He also wondered whether it would be feasible to use national accounting procedures as one way of harmonizing rules and procedures. He invited comment on any areas where UNDP was not satisfied with the support, information, and project approval processing

it was receiving from Headquarters. Finally, UNICEF was taking a rights-based approach to programme planning, and he would like to learn more about that approach on an operational level.

Mr. ABDELLATIF (Egypt), noting that there had been much criticism of cooperation in that area, asked about the role UNDP had played in the coordination of technical assistance in Egypt. It would also be helpful if the resident coordinator could shed some light on cooperation between the Bretton Woods institutions and United Nations agencies in the area of structural adjustment policies.

Mr. BRESLER (United States of America) said that, in such areas as poverty alleviation, policy would have to be set on a country-wide basis. Because UNDP did not have significant financial resources to contribute, he wondered whether it could play a role at the macroeconomic policy level, or whether it confined itself to providing a technical assistance or intellectual input.

Mr. AVAKOV (Russian Federation) asked what role the Government of Egypt played in the inter-agency project evaluation mechanism and whether a format already existed for proposals for technical assistance that included investment.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme), replying to the representative of Tanzania, said that the lack of harmonization of rules and procedures was indeed one of the most serious impediments to coordination at the country level. It was his hope that the unified procedures adopted by UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA would be extended to all agencies in the field. The Government of Egypt played a central role in every exercise and promoted every initiative. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs dealt mainly with the United Nations and its agencies, while the Ministry of International Cooperation dealt with the Bretton Woods institutions and bilateral donors, and the two ministries coordinated their activities before approaching the international institutions. The planning and evaluation mechanisms and even the production of the human development report had been country-driven.

Problems were certainly encountered in project execution in the field, and perhaps the greatest difficulties arose because of the sense that the resident coordinator system lacked a strong mandate. While the United Nations contributed only 1 to 1.5 per cent of the total of international assistance to

Egypt, it had a vital role in providing services. UNDP had been able to break through administrative bottlenecks and provide management for several projects funded by the Bretton Woods institutions. Two such examples were civil service reform, where it had cooperated with the Governments of Egypt and Canada, and the reform of the capital and security market, which was not ready to cope with the transition to a market economy. The United Nations agencies had a role to play because problems could not always be addressed at the macroeconomic level.

In reply to the representative of Pakistan, although other agencies were not strictly required to inform the resident coordinator of their activities, they generally did so because it was impossible to operate otherwise. Procedures for the transfer of projects to national execution varied considerably and there was room for improvement in that area.

A number of delegations had asked how Headquarters could help the resident coordinators and other representatives in the field: the key issue was strategic decentralization. The United Nations was most effective at the country level and operated best as a network. It was time for talk of decentralization to be translated into action at the field level.

Mr. SELMER (World Food Programme (WFP)) cited as an example of cooperation between the World Bank and the World Food Programme a project undertaken in the north-western desert areas of Egypt to assist Bedouin families to improve their agricultural practices and collect rainwater, with the overall goal of improving household food security. The evaluation had revealed that the project remained limited to the coastal areas where conditions were less harsh, and thus was not achieving its objective of reaching the poorest of the poor. WFP needed cash for tools and to employ skilled labour to work under the most difficult conditions. The World Bank had cash available, but only enough to cover 40 per cent of the overall project requirement. The World Bank and WFP had therefore entered into a co-financing agreement whereby WFP provided food for the workers and the World Bank provided the cash to hire skilled labour and buy tools. The Government of Egypt and the farmers were also partners in the project.

Mr. NAMAZI (UNICEF) said that at the field level UNICEF was moving away from service delivery to advocacy for rights. The "rights approach" to programme development had been devised to encourage ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. First, a situation analysis of the

enjoyment of such rights as health, education and survival would be conducted, which would be linked with the goals of the World Summit for Children. Those analyses provided a broad perspective that could be used to draw the Government's attention to serious areas of neglect, to establish a link between the Convention and legislative measures and to bring government departments together.

As to the problems encountered, he agreed that delegation of decision-making authority to the field was of the utmost importance.

Mr. KANCHI (UNFPA) said that because it had been held in Cairo, the International Conference on Population and Development had generated a great deal of interest in population issues at the higher levels of Government. At the lower levels, however, the commitment appeared to be weaker.

The decentralization of authority had not been followed by strengthening of field offices, in terms of human resources and skills.

The United Nations agencies took a strong supportive role in the management of population programmes financed by the Bretton Woods institutions and by a number of bilateral donors. A programme appraisal mechanism, encompassing such agencies as UNICEF, WHO, and non-governmental and grass-roots organizations, was fully operational.

Dr. AL-KHAWASHKY (World Health Organization (WHO)) stressed that especially at the country level, coordination and planning should take place between the various agencies before they committed themselves to a project. The World Bank was assisting the Egyptian Government in health sector reform, but had made no effort to seek the advice of WHO. The latter had approached the Bank on its own initiative to offer information on the current status of the health sector.

Mr. SHIHAB-ELDIN (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) said that one problem that must be addressed was the multiplicity of national counterpart agencies with which the specialized agencies were required to deal at the operational level. Another was the administrative and other non-technical issues which technical staff had to deal with in the field. Finally, training programmes must be expanded, particularly in the managerial and technical fields, so that mission staff could keep abreast of the rapid changes that were taking place in their respective subject areas.

Mr. CHATAIGNER (France) asked whether decisions adopted at Headquarters, such as General Assembly resolution 50/120, were transmitted to the field accompanied by clear guidelines for their implementation. He noted that UNDP proposed to earmark 1.8 per cent of its resources to the strengthening of the resident coordinator system. It would be useful to know what concrete actions were envisaged to achieve that objective. Given that the resident coordinator system relied on the goodwill of all concerned, it would be helpful to know how much the need for good working relationships between the resident coordinator and the various heads of mission was taken into account when making the appointment.

With regard to the management reforms currently under way in UNICEF, it would be interesting to know whether that exercise included the strengthening of cooperation with other agencies and whether the proposed reforms had been discussed with sister agencies. It would also be useful to know whether the various agencies circulated their mission statements to each other.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme), replying to the question of whether decisions taken at headquarters were accompanied by guidelines for their implementation at the field level, said that at times they were transmitted without comment, at other times they were filtered down through the executive boards of the agencies concerned and at times they were accompanied by specific rules and guidelines.

On the question of the funds available in UNDP country offices, decisions on the use of such funds must be taken in consultation with the Government concerned. Indeed, it was not even possible to respond to proposals for project funding without first consulting the Government.

As for the evaluation of the performance of resident coordinators, while his own performance as UNDP Resident Representative in Egypt was evaluated by the Programme, his performance as United Nations Resident Coordinator was not subject to evaluation, even though he spent 30 to 35 per cent of his time performing the latter functions.

Mr. SELMER (World Food Programme) said that decisions adopted at headquarters were sometimes forwarded to the field accompanied by covering memoranda requesting that specific action should be taken. Field offices were sometimes also requested to report on the status of implementation of decisions. Rules therefore did exist for the follow-up of decisions at the country level.

The World Food Programme was committed to the strengthening of the regional coordinator system, which still suffered from a number of deficiencies. To that end, the Executive Director had recently written to the heads of country offices requesting their views on the problems and shortcomings of the system. The replies were being analysed at headquarters and a report would be submitted to the Administrator of UNDP.

Mr. KANCHI (United Nations Population Fund) said that UNFPA headquarters relied on inputs from the field to formulate guidelines for the implementation of decisions at the country level, in collaboration with other specialized agencies. On the question of training, the International Centre for Advanced Technical and Vocational Training (ICAT) in Turin already provided some training in the field of coordination, although much more could be done in that area.

Mr. NAMAZI (United Nations Children's Fund) said that UNICEF received guidelines for the implementation of resolutions at the country level and was committed to the resident coordinator system. What was needed, however, was more space for creativity and decision-making at the field level and a change in the current headquarters-oriented management structure. Significant savings could be realized in expenditures on premises, for example, if missions had the authority to make decisions locally.

Mr. ALOM (Bangladesh) said that it was far from clear how United Nations activities in such fields as poverty eradication and integrated rural development could be harmonized at the operational level in the absence of an appropriate mechanism for coordination and division of responsibilities. The objective of harmonization was to avoid duplication and to help Governments in their preparation of target-oriented programmes. He wondered if enough was being done to consult with Governments and to encourage their participation in that process. It was time to move beyond discussions and to involve the private sector, civil society, non-governmental organizations and Governments in the coordination efforts.

He pointed out that country strategy notes were merely a reflection of a country's perspective on development and could in no way be considered as a solution to its development problems. Nevertheless, the United Nations system should help to strengthen the capacity of Governments to play a more active role in the preparation of the notes.

With regard to the role of United Nations resident coordinators, he wondered whether coordinators enjoyed the authority and appropriate environment to effectively assist Governments in achieving the policy objectives of the various agencies of the United Nations system.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme) said that efforts had been made to harmonize programme execution whenever feasible, but much of the responsibility for doing so lay with the host Government. It was true that the resident coordinator system involved a great deal of discussion, but it was equally the case that a decision had been made to progress once and for all from talk to action. The country strategy note was by no means an indispensable instrument; the most important thing was to receive a clear message from the host Government about what it expected from the United Nations system. Sometimes Governments would elaborate development plans that were so broad in scope that individual agencies had ample opportunity to pick and choose the areas in which they wanted to become involved. Such an approach tended to militate against harmonization and coordination. Governments should issue clear guidelines about what they wanted and when they wanted it done.

Regarding the mechanism for implementing operational activities, a Government would normally appoint an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to canvass the opinions of other ministries and define what the country expected from the United Nations system. The plan was then transmitted to the United Nations system for discussion with a view to implementation.

It was impossible to state categorically whether the resident coordinator system was actually working, but he believed that success could only be achieved if the host Government showed support for the entire process. The local authorities had to provide a lead, otherwise the efforts of development partners would flounder.

Mrs. REBONG (Philippines) noted that the decline in the level of resources seemed to be due, in part, to donor fatigue on the part of taxpayers in donor nations and asked what the representatives of the Funds and Programmes proposed to do in order to rekindle enthusiasm for United Nations-sponsored projects.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme) said that lack of resources was not a problem in all countries; indeed, in Egypt funding was not a contentious issue, since resource mobilization strategies at the country level

had been very successful. The Funds and Programmes had no means of influencing public perception in donor countries of development activities. The development programmes themselves had to stand or fall on their own merits.

Mrs. KABA CAMARA (Côte d'Ivoire), noting that many development programmes were funded by a combination of regular budget funds topped up by voluntary contributions, said that since the flow of voluntary contributions was often erratic, it sometimes happened that programmes could not be fully implemented. The resident coordinator should indicate whether programmes were budgeted for solely on the basis of guaranteed incoming funds.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme) said that the strategic approach was to implement only those development activities for which resources had been guaranteed.

Mr. NAMAZI (United Nations Children's Fund) said that Funds and Programmes involved in development activities must be realistic, but at the same time resources from bilateral donors had always been forthcoming for well-organized and worthwhile projects. However, the resident coordinator must work within the resource ceiling mandated by the Executive Board. Domestic resources mobilized by Governments and local communities also played a tremendously important role.

Mr. ALOM (Bangladesh) said that by pursuing the goals of harmonization and collaboration, United Nations Funds and Programmes could actually act as a catalyst in persuading Governments to mobilize resources for development.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme) said that resource mobilization at the country level was more successful when the host Government had to deal with the United Nations system as a whole rather than as a collection of individual agencies. A united front on the part of United Nations Funds and Programmes elicited a united response and eliminated competition for scarce resources. It should also be borne in mind that the United Nations effort in the field of development assistance was not simply addressed to the host Government; it was also aimed at local donors, local communities and non-governmental organizations, thus creating the broadest possible forum for discussion and involvement.

Mr. CHATAIGNER (France) said that his delegation wished to know more about the proposal to make use of common premises mentioned by the representative of the United Nations Children's Fund.

Mr. NAMAZI (United Nations Children's Fund) said that the advantages of common premises were many, for example making possible the establishment of a common information centre. The underlying aim was to devolve more decision-making authority to country teams at the field level.

Mr. MUZIO (United Nations Development Programme), replying to a question from Ms. KABA CAMARA (Côte d'Ivoire), said that almost all of the experts employed in development activities in Egypt were Egyptian. Foreign expatriates were hardly ever used.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.